

Study Sees Laxity in A-Waste Hauling

By Jack Anderson

Trucks and trains, carrying vulnerable casks of lethal radioactive materials, roll across the country every day.

Each train cask packs six times the radioactivity of the Hiroshima bomb. A fire or wreck could kill some victims within a few days and condemn many more to drawn-out death from cancer. A trainload of the nuclear casks, in case of a crash, could kill thousands.

These are the frightening findings of the Public Interest Research Group in Michigan, one of several state consumer organizations founded by Ralph Nader. The seven-month study was directed by Marion Anderson, who got help from academic experts all over the country.

Their 63-page report, still classified secret, gives a harrowing description of the hauling operations. The radioactive material, bound to and from nuclear facilities, is placed in heavy casks. Although these are sturdy enough, defects can be caused by bumps on welds, bolts, valves and gaskets.

Rolling over the roads and rails, the metal and liquid contents of the casks are superheated. This turns the container into "a huge pressure cooker," ready to spew out gases and fluids at pressures up to 300 pounds per square inch if its thick metal skin is cracked.

The resulting radioactive contamination could cause diseases of the skin, genitals, bones and lungs, cancer of the thyroid and other fatal ailments.

Within a half-mile of a major leak, "deaths of infants, young children and susceptible people" are likely, and "land would remain contaminated for over 14 years," warns the report. Miles downwind from an accident, there would be danger.

Based on population densities, the report estimates a train wreck would cause the gradual deaths of 3,800 persons in Boston, 4,100 in Chicago, 3,000 in Detroit, 2,700 in Miami, 4,000 in New York City, 4,300 in San Francisco and 3,400 in Washington. A crash in an average suburb could kill 700.

"The Atomic Energy Commission has not been forthright about the possible emissions of the casks which carry irradiated fuel," charges the report. To get the evidence, the Michigan group assigned workers to follow trucks carrying the casks. They chatted with the drivers, checked casks, talked to police and interviewed people handling nuclear materials.

The investigators found that drivers have no real training for hauling nuclear wares and are not even equipped with radiation leak detectors. Police aren't notified of the nuclear cargo routes, and the casks of at-

omic waste aren't adequately marked.

In one case, a trucker parked his deadly cargo at a terminal and went home for the weekend. It happened that the outside of the casks were contaminated. "One wonders," says the report, "if any little children . . . had been fascinated by the big casks and touched them, thus becoming contaminated with radioactivity."

The Atomic Energy Commission virtually does no testing of the casks either in its laboratories or under road conditions. Instead, it leaves this grave responsibility to the manufacturers and users, who can save money by winking at safety.

"Poorly manufactured casks full of lethal materials may be on the roads today," states the study. "There is no way of knowing."

No major accidents have been reported, but AEC procedures are so lax, the study alleges, that some may have occurred through slow, sinister, undetected leaks.

The report calls for government inspections, automatic buzzers and lights to warn of leakage, two-way radios in all nuclear-bearing trucks for reporting accidents, and bright, yellow painting of all nuclear casks with lettering visible at 250 feet.

Footnote: The AEC defended its regulations on the casks, saying

it carefully checks all designs and spot checks casks during production. But the AEC admits it leaves the real testing up to industry. An AEC spokesman said there have been no injuries or leakages reported during the actual transport of the casks. He insisted the precautions now are more than adequate.

Fuel Foul-Up—With a waste of the fuel it is supposed to save, the Federal Energy Office rushed allocation plans to state governors last week by commercial jet and fast cars.

Couriers carried the plans, hot off the press, to the FEO's 10 regional offices. But unhappily, the couriers got on the planes in Washington without all the materials. An internal FEO memo explains what happened to the papers on these key subjects:

"State Role—Could not be completed because the regulations were changed so much and so late that the state's role could not be defined because couriers left.

"Suppliers Manual—It was clearly impossible to finish it by Monday.

"Abstract of Regulations—Did not finish in time, since regs were changing constantly.

"(Deputy FEO Director John) Sawhill's Summary—I was given one Xerox copy 15 minutes after the cars left."

©1974, United Feature Syndicate